

Inclusive Strategies for Postgraduate Research Degrees

Individual student needs, equal access and reasonable adjustments.



Guidance for PGR students and their supervisors

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You may also wish to see the [Reasonable Adjustments to Assessments and Competence Standards](#), April 2025. Please note that the process for arranging adjustments for postgraduate research differs from undergraduate and taught postgraduate procedures - see Section 5.

1.Authorship of this document

This guidance has been co-created with PGR students, professional services staff and academics, and collated by the Doctoral Development Manager. Please contact doctoral-college@port.ac.uk with any feedback.

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2. Useful Contacts

Disability Advice: disabilityadvice@port.ac.uk +44 (0) 23 9284 3462

Doctoral College: doctoral-college@port.ac.uk +44 (0) 23 9284 2984

Research Degrees: researchdegrees@port.ac.uk +44 (0) 23 9284 7707

3. Purpose of this guidance

The following guidance explores a range of ways to ensure and enhance the inclusivity of the postgraduate research experience at the University of Portsmouth. The strategies below for thinking about approaches to supervision, milestone assessment and examination represent good practice not only for students with identified or diagnosed needs, but also for any student who may benefit from them. The foundation of inclusivity is good communication between students and supervisors, and this guidance is designed to facilitate that conversation.

The University of Portsmouth values the diversity of the student community and recognises the importance of accommodating individual needs which may include physical requirements, mental health support and neurodivergence. [Disability Advice](#) can help applicants apply for any funded support and recommend appropriate reasonable adjustments; once registered, students may then contact Disability Advice for advice and guidance throughout their studies.

Postgraduate Research Students (PGRs) are introduced to Disability Advice at the Doctoral College Induction, but it is good practice for all first supervisors to address them again during initial meetings with PGRs, as prompted by the [UPR1 Postgraduate Research Student/Supervisor Arrangements](#). Regular reminders of services will be given throughout the student's registration.

While discussing needs with Disability Advice is recommended, students requiring straightforward adjustments or who are familiar with their needs can contact Research Degrees directly to agree arrangements. Disability Advice will be notified afterwards to ensure records are maintained.

This guidance is intended to demonstrate ways in which the postgraduate research journey can be made accessible to students at every stage. In response to discussions with students and staff about the rich diversity of our postgraduate research cohort, we have taken a fresh look at our processes and procedures with the intention of removing barriers to success.

This document includes concise Guidance for Supervisors and Guidelines for Viva/Annual/Major Reviews designed by Professor Beatriz Lopez; these are followed by examples of reasonable adjustments to assessment and how they can be arranged.

4. Disability Advice (previously known as ASDAC)

In many cases, PGRS will find that they can agree adjustments at a local level with their supervisors, but [Disability Advice](#) will support students and applicants who contact them to discuss a disability or requirement for additional support. Disability Advice provides a confidential service for students and can give advice on academic support, discuss any reasonable adjustments that may be required, and refer students to appropriate agencies for further support.

Students can contact Disability Advice in confidence if they have needs that might impact their ability to access the campus, curriculum, teaching, learning, assessments and any other University service. If students require support or think they might, they can contact Disability Advice pre-application to discuss potential funding and reasonable adjustments; this is not a requirement however and they may contact them after accepting a place. Early contact with Disability Advice is advisable to allow plenty of time to explore strategies at the beginning of the degree. If a student contacts Disability Advice before applying, they will not discuss the situation with the admissions panel unless the student requires adjustments to the admissions process.

Students may decide to engage with Disability Advice at any stage of their degree but are advised to allow a minimum of two months before a review or the viva voce to allow good time for any desirable changes to be arranged.

Disability Advice contact details:

disabilityadvice@port.ac.uk +44 (0)23 9284 3462

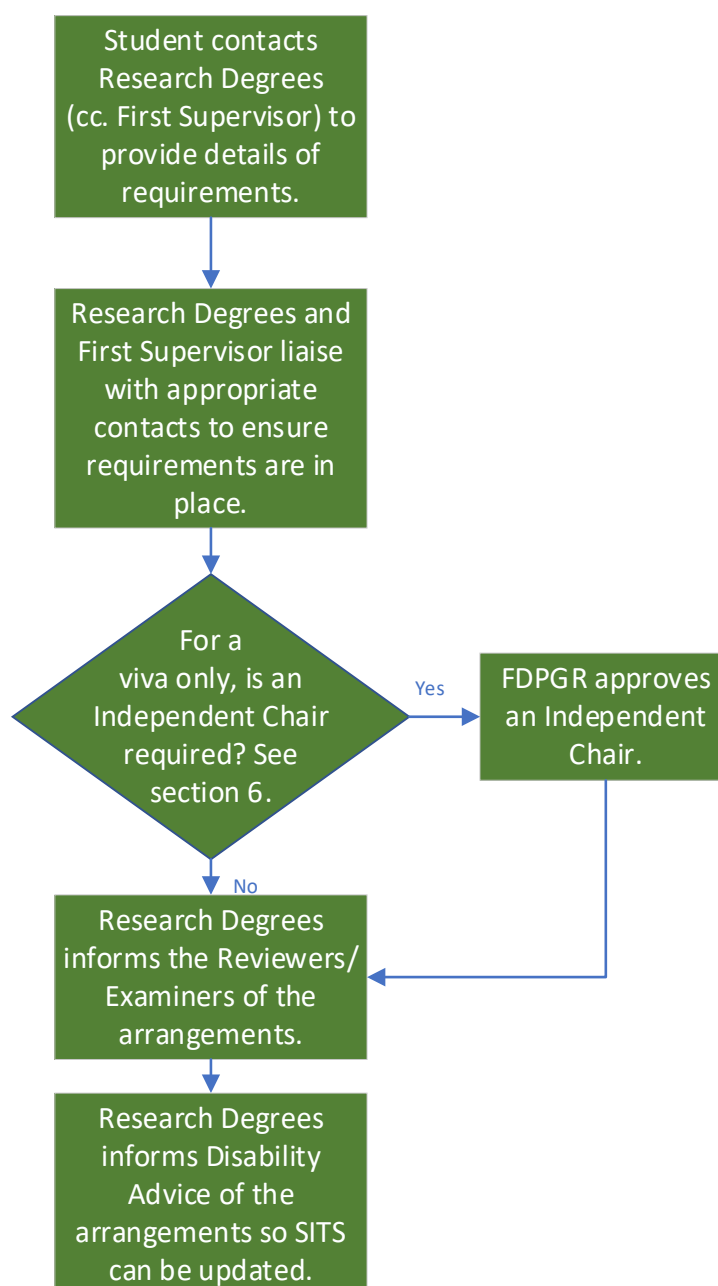
5. Arranging Adjustments

Research Degrees - researchdegrees@port.ac.uk - oversees the administration of all reviews and examinations for PGRs and ensures the University's regulations are upheld. In the reminder emails sent to students before submission dates for reviews and examinations, Research Degrees will invite consideration of adjustments and provide a link to this document.

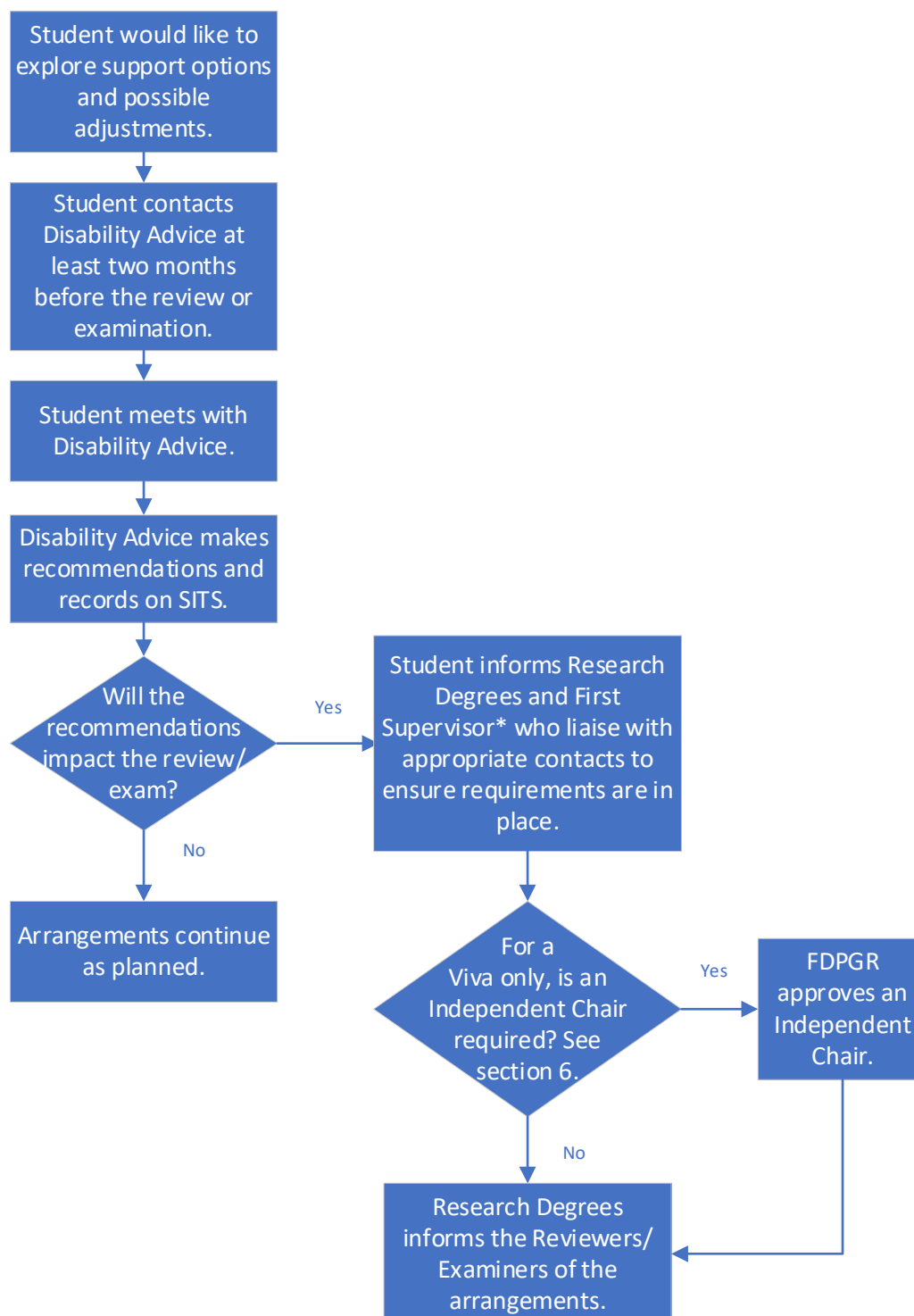
Students are advised to include details of any adjustments they require in the email when submitting for review or examination, and to copy in their first supervisor.

The arrangement and recording of adjustments may happen in two ways.

1. If the student requires an adjustment and already has access to the necessary arrangements, or requirements are of a practical nature that can be easily accommodated:



2. If the student feels they may require an adjustment but needs to explore this:



* Supervisors can also check Staff View on the Disability Advice tab on the SITS Student System as shown in the screenshot on the next page.

Staff View – circled below – will allow supervisors to see any Disability Advice recommendations for students (the title will change from ASDAC during the next academic year).



6.Independent Chairs for Viva Voce

Where reasonable adjustments have been agreed, an Independent Chair should be appointed for the viva voce if Examiners are required to:

- give prior notice of questions;
- ask questions in a particular way;
- make allowances for student behaviours;
- modify their own behaviours to help the student (e.g. not raise their voice);
- allow the student time to process answers;
- allow un-planned breaks if requested by the student.

There may be other instances where it would be appropriate to appoint an Independent Chair.

Part of the role of the Independent Chair in these cases will be to ensure that the agreed adjustment is applied consistently and that Examiners remember and abide by the agreed arrangements.

An independent Chair will also be required if:

- a support provider, friend or colleague is required to accompany the student.

An independent Chair **will not** be required where adjustments are of a practical nature that will not impact the examination such as changes to room layout, practical access arrangements, planned breaks or the use of assistive technology.

Students can request an Independent Chair even if the University does not require one.

7.Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)

Please see the webpage [Financial support for disabled students](#) for information about the Disabled Students' Allowance which is available for UK students. See the webpage for

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further eligibility criteria.

8.Guidelines for Supervisors

The following guidelines are adapted from an article by Prof. Rigby, Dr. Amy Pearson, and Jess Hirst of the Centre for Neurodiversity & Development at the University of Durham. These recommendations were intended for supervising neurodivergent students, but they illustrate good practice that applies to all PGR supervision (see [original article for additional advice on how to supervise neurodivergent students](#)).

- [UoP EDI Policy Statement](#): Supervisors should be familiar with the University of Portsmouth's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Policy Statement. All supervisors have access to EDI training via [Docebo](#), including modules such as Understanding Unconscious Bias, Neurodiversity at Work and Diversity in Learning and Teaching.
- *Inclusive Language*: To ensure respectful and accurate communication, be mindful of the language used when discussing neurodiversity, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other protected characteristics (see this [guide for neurodiversity](#) and this guide for [general advice on inclusive language](#)).
- *Establishing Communication*: In the initial supervisor meetings, discuss and agree on a communication strategy that works for both you and your supervisee (face to face meetings, online, email, etc.). Determine how often meetings will take place, who will take notes, and the preferred method for documenting discussions.
- *Clear Structure and Timelines*: Provide clear timelines and a structured approach to tasks. Minimise expectations for multitasking to ensure focus and clarity in goals.
- *Clarify Hidden Academic Expectations*: Make any implicit expectations in academia explicit. Discuss topics such as data ownership, authorship, collegiality, attendance at research seminars, and other often unspoken aspects of academic life.
- *Create a Safe Space*: Foster an environment in supervision where students feel comfortable expressing their feelings about their progress and any challenges they face. This is essential for promoting well-being and growth.
- *Encourage Individuality and Creativity*: Recognise that diversity is an asset to academia. Support your supervisees in exploring their individual approaches, ideas, and creativity in their research.
- *Support Personal and Professional Development*: Allow time and space for personal and professional development tailored to each student's unique needs and goals.
- *Help Build Networks*: Assist the student in establishing their own professional and support networks to ensure they have the resources and connections they need to succeed.
- *Sensitive Feedback*: Be mindful that some students, such as those with autism, ADHD, or heightened anxiety, may be more sensitive to negative feedback due to previous experiences of rejection or criticism. Approach feedback with care and constructive guidance.
- *Consider Intersectionality*: Recognise that protected characteristics often intersect. Be aware of the various factors that might uniquely impact a student's experience.

Tailor your supervision to each individual's needs, avoiding stereotypes and fostering an inclusive environment.

- *Scaffold Questions*: Instead of asking open-ended questions that may be overwhelming, try to provide more structured and concrete questions that give students a clearer framework for response.
- *Monitor for Burnout and Mental Health Risks*: Be conscious of the potential for burnout and the heightened risks of mental health challenges that doctoral programmes can present. Provide support and recognition of these challenges and encourage a healthy balance between work and well-being.

9.Guidelines for Viva/Annual/Major Reviews

Before scheduling the viva or review, it is recommended that both the supervisor and the student meet to discuss key aspects of the process. Two essential points to keep in mind are:

1. *Avoid Assumptions*: Do not assume what the student may need or prefer. Instead, engage in an open discussion, using the suggestions below as a guide (Sandland et al, 2023).
2. *Clarify the Purpose of the viva or review for all*: Ensure that the panel and student understand that the primary purpose of the examination is to assess the student's academic abilities, not their behaviour or communication style (Chown et al., 2015).

In addition to these points, we've compiled suggestions from the literature regarding topics supervisors, students and the panel may want to consider in preparation for the viva or review:

Selecting the Viva/Review Panel and Format

- *Friend/ or Independent Chair*: Would the student prefer an independent chair or advocate of their choice to be present during the review?
- *Format of the Review*: Where a choice is possible, does the student prefer the viva/review to be conducted online or in-person?
- *Expert Examiners*: Are there any examiners with expertise in protected characteristics or adjustment needs who would be particularly suited to the student?

Prior to the Viva/Review

- *Needs Assessment*: Conduct an assessment to identify any circumstances that might affect the student's performance (e.g., sensory issues, timing of the examination, anxiety, etc.), as well as potential stress triggers and strategies to manage them. **See Sandland et al 2023 for a helpful flowchart to guide this discussion.**
- *Possible adjustments discussion*: Based on the needs assessment, discuss with the student any adjustments that may be necessary.
- *Panel liaison*: Communicate with the panel via Research Degrees to ensure that any agreed-upon adjustments are implemented.
- *Engagement Rules*: Whenever possible, agree with the panel on rules for engagement, such as breaks, timings, signalling rising anxiety levels, and arrangements for food and drink. Also, establish a clear structure for the day (see Box 1 for an example).
- *Preparation*: Discuss with the student whether they would like a practice viva/review, an opportunity to meet the panel/ Independent Chair in advance, or a chance to familiarise themselves with the room where the review will take place.

- *Session Expectations*: Explain to the student the likely course of events during the review, including the roles of each panel member, the types of questions that may be asked, and when and how feedback will be provided.
- *Discuss Possible Outcomes*: Clarify the potential outcomes of the review (e.g. minor corrections, major corrections) and the timeline for receiving results and resubmission of corrections.
- *Managing Anxiety*: Reassure the student that feeling anxious is normal. If the anxiety becomes overwhelming, they can request a break or give the pre-agreed signal to the panel to indicate when a break may be needed.
- *Answers*: The supervisor, student and panel may want to agree on a strategy for redirecting answers or transitioning between questions if necessary (e.g., raising a hand or saying something like: “I’m conscious of time, so I’ll now focus more on X,” or “That was great, now let’s move on to...”).

Box 1. Example of agreed structure for the viva/review.

1. The panel will convene at 9.30am.
2. The viva will commence at 10.30am.
3. The viva will, in all likelihood, be completed by 12.30pm.
4. The candidate will be able to use a desk to sit behind and bring drink/food (all those present in the viva/review will need to be given advance notice of food in case of allergies).
5. The candidate will have access to their thesis and any notes they wish to bring.
6. The candidate will be allowed to take a break of a reasonable duration at any time if their anxieties become overwhelming.
7. The panel will start questioning by asking the candidate to outline their work, rationale for doing it, and their overall experiences.
8. The panel will subsequently ask questions relating to the thesis in a chronological manner, i.e. starting at the beginning of the thesis and working through.
9. The panel will ask questions in a direct, linguistically clear manner and the candidate will not be ‘marked down’ if they require clarification; additionally, the panel will respectfully inform the candidate if they have answered a question to their satisfaction, or ask for additional detail if required.

10. The nature of the following examples of reasonable adjustments

The ideas below are examples of general approaches or reasonable adjustments that have been used in universities; they are intended to help PGRs and their supervisors ensure students are not disadvantaged. The following information can be used to stimulate discussion between students and staff about strategies that might help. The list of examples is not exhaustive, and the guidance will be reviewed periodically to reflect new considerations.

11. Supervisor awareness

It is helpful for supervisors to:

- Recognise that students at any academic level and age may benefit from support and adjustments to enable them to flourish;
- Ask the student to talk about themselves generally and their needs in an early supervision meeting;
- Discuss the possibility of reasonable adjustments with all students whether or not they have disclosed any particular needs;
- Recognise that the perceived power balance of the supervisor/student relationship may impact a student's willingness or ability to raise issues and ask questions;
- Acknowledge that students may not wish to disclose needs to their supervisors, and that it is therefore important to discuss other avenues such as Disability Advice;
- Discuss student-led networks such as the [PGR Society](#) and the Neurodiversity Group - students may benefit from speaking to other students about their needs and feelings;
- Be aware that neurodivergent people may mask their feelings or reactions, which can cause additional anxiety, stress or tiredness;
- Be aware that not all expectations in the University or discipline may be explicit, and ensure the student has ample opportunity to ask questions about and prepare themselves for milestone assessments and events such as seminars and conferences;
- Regularly give students the opportunity to discuss how they are feeling and raise any new issues;
- Support the student in planning training and development activities suited to their needs;
- Take the Neurodiversity at Work and Diversity in Learning and Teaching training available in [Docebo](#).

12. Common challenges experienced by PGRs, including neurodivergent students

- Time management and organisation.
- Maintaining concentration and staying on task.
- Fluctuations in motivation to study.
- Difficulties with confidence, executive function, and memory.
- Social communication difficulties and anxiety.
- Public speaking and networking.
- The impact of masking, which can lead to exhaustion and burnout from sustained interactions.
- Writing difficulties, which may be mitigated through techniques such as mind mapping or assistive software.

Tan et al (2025)¹ have identified a number of factors that can affect doctoral students:

- Overwork may be normalised, and students may avoid holidays and sick leave.
- The student may feel pressure to be 'perfect'.
- A tendency to overcommit.
- Feeling that asking for reasonable adjustments may not be perceived well by supervisors and others.
- Imposter syndrome.
- Feeling undue pressure to publish.
- Negotiating bureaucracy.
- Open-plan spaces and hot-desking can lead to unplanned communication.
- Working from home can help.
- Unclear instructions and ambiguous communication.
- Neurodivergence.
- A fear that disclosure of a need may affect career chances.
- Not wanting to feel different.
- Pressure to adhere to norms.
- The social communication conventions integral to reviews, the viva and networking activities can cause anxiety.
- Knowing which rules can be broken (implicit expectations).
- Intense focus can be perceived as rudeness.
- Intonation or blunt language may affect how they come across to others.
- A history of educational trauma.

¹ Tan, D., Edwards, C., Mewburn, I., Simpson, K., Webster, A.A., Brownlow, C. (2025). Understanding the experiences of neurodivergent research students: A mixed methods systematic review. [Prepared for publication].

13. Supervisor and student approaches throughout the research journey

- Assistive tools that can help include speech-to-text, read-aloud, mind mapping, writing aids (e.g. Grammarly), and recording software.
- There are a number of Academic Skills sessions in the [Doctoral Development Programme](#) (DPP) that can support students in their studies including Reading, Note-taking and Synthesis, Academic Writing Group, Critical Reading and Writing and Introduction to Writing the Literature Review. The Library Skills and Research Governance and Organisation sections of the DDP also contain many sessions which help with finding sources and organising projects and information.
- [Learning and academic support](#) is available in a range of formats to support students.
- Supervisors should underline the structure of each year, and the work needed for each milestone.
- The agenda or structure of the supervisory meetings should be consistent.
- Supervisors should ensure that students know how to access the resources they need and get in touch with key staff contacts; helping students settle into their environment and meet other staff and students is essential if they are to progress well with their research.
- Students should be given plenty of time to discuss their ideas, ask questions and seek clarification in each meeting.
- Neurodivergent students may appreciate particular approaches to scheduling meetings, recording the content of meetings, the provision of feedback, how to communicate in and between meetings, and the formatting of written information.
- Receiving information such as handouts, sources or slides in good time before a meeting or training session that refers to them may help students to focus on the key learning points.
- The pattern and use of supervisory meetings may be adjusted to support the student e.g. a longer gap for a draft to be prepared, or more frequent but shorter meetings to support progress.
- Students living with a health condition may prefer certain times of day for meetings.
- Students may need to request a change of mode (e.g. full-time to part-time) in response to other factors in their lives, and are no longer limited to one change during their registration;
- Flexibility around milestones may be necessary.

14. Before a review/examination

- It is an expectation that first supervisors will arrange at least one mock viva voce for PGR students in advance of the real viva voce. The mock may help to identify factors that can be addressed in advance of the formal examination, and it is therefore desirable to create the same conditions as far as possible. Mocks for reviews might also help the student, particularly before the first review.
- Students can meet the Independent Chair for a viva (if appointed) to discuss the format of the review/examination.
- Students can be introduced to or meet the examiners to familiarise themselves with them.
- An agenda and schedule with approximate timings can be shared with the student.
- Examiners can be asked to group their questions in coherent sections rather than switch frequently between themes or topics.
- Students can be given advance notice of the nature and sequence of the groups of questions.
- Students can be given advance notice of the main questions the examiners wish to ask. However, the organic nature of a viva voce means that additional questions may arise from the discussion, so examiners can be asked to allow time for the student's response or agree a break for the student to consider their answers.
- Reviewers/examiners can receive a brief written by the student explaining any behaviours they may exhibit or feelings they may experience when in examination conditions.

15. Who will be present as a review or viva voce?

In addition to the student, reviewers, examiners, supervisors and an independent chair (if required), other support staff may be present. Such arrangements should be discussed well in advance of the event in question to allow for a suitable person to be sourced - each case is different, but at least two months would be appropriate. The student should have the opportunity to communicate with any additional support staff beforehand and all those present should be briefed about the schedule and protocols for the event.

16. Environment

The following actions can help students feel comfortable and avoid distractions:

- The student can visit the room in which the viva voce is to take place to assess accessibility and suggest reasonable adjustments;
- Materials referred to during the event should be available in formats accessible to the student;
- A seating plan for panel members, the student and any others present can be distributed to everyone beforehand;
- Any required assistive technology should be connected and checked in the allocated room in advance of the event;

- The possibility of intrusive noises or activities in adjacent spaces should be assessed and addressed;
- The temperature, lighting and noise in the room should be checked and addressed where distractions or discomfort may be created;
- The comfort and positioning of the furniture for the number of people expected in the room should be checked;
- Water should be available in the room for each person present;
- Other methods of communicating can be made available to the student to help them express themselves such as whiteboards, flip-charts or software;
- A quiet and comfortable space can be made available for students to use during breaks.

17.Environment online – additional considerations

- The link and platform for the online review/examination should be checked in advance by the student and supervisor, and any issues resolved with the help of appropriate support.
- The student should familiarise themselves with the functionality of the chosen online platform and equipment before the event, particularly the quality of the microphone and speakers, and the ability to share slides where necessary.
- At the beginning of the event, all members should be given the opportunity to introduce themselves and test connectivity – if there are issues such as delays in the transmission of sound or a poor signal, agreement should be reached about how the meeting will proceed e.g. if there is a considerable delay in the transition of sound, the participants affected might use the icons to indicate their wish to speak.
- Captions may be switched on.
- Captions disappear quickly, so the supervisor could type questions from the examiners into the chat box so they remain visible to the student.

18.Hybrid viva voce

If the examination is to be in a hybrid format, the mock viva could also be conducted in a hybrid format to enable the student to familiarise themselves with the impact on communications.

19.Structure of the review/examination

- Rest breaks can be scheduled or the student encouraged to indicate when they need to take a break;
- Other participants can ask the student if a break is needed if the student appears to need one but has not requested it;
- Time can be given for students to make notes of the questions asked so they can refer back to them;

- Students should be reminded they can ask for questions to be repeated or rephrased where necessary;
- The time needed for the review/examination must allow for any reasonable adjustments;

Appendix A: Additional Resources

This section will be expanded and transferred to a webpage in the near future to allow for regular development and additions.

If you have suggestions for online resources that would be of help to postgraduate researchers, please send them to doctoral-college@port.ac.uk.

Autism

- University of Portsmouth: [Support for autistic students](#)
- Riby, D., Pearson, A. & Hirst, J. (2025). [How to support neurodivergent postgraduate students](#). Times Higher Education, 14th January 2025
- Sandland, B., MacLeod, A., Hall, M. N., & Chown, N. (2023). [Accommodation through personalisation](#): Ensuring the autistic student has an equal opportunity for success in the PhD viva voce. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(10), 1404-1419
- Chown, N., Beardon, L., Martin, N., & Ellis, S. (2015). [Examining intellectual ability, not social prowess: removing barriers from the doctoral viva for autistic candidates](#). *Autism Policy & Practice: The Open Access Autism Journal*, 1(2)

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

- [Too many tabs open: Doing a PhD with ADHD](#)
- [My PhD with ADHD - Ana Paula reveals lab life as a neurodivergent student](#)
- Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H., Hultman, L., Österborg Wiklund, S., Nygren, A., Storm, P., & Sandberg, G. (2023). [ADHD in higher education and academia](#). *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 12(3), 1–26
- [The Thesis Whisperer](#)

Dyslexia

- Lam, J (2015). [The educational experiences of being a graduate student with dyslexia](#) Doctoral dissertation, Capella University.
- [Ability Net](#)
- [University of Exeter](#)

OCD – Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

- [NHS Website](#)
- University of Portsmouth MyPort page: [OCD](#)